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AUTHOR Trank, Douglas M.
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ABSTRACT

Secondary school forensic programs have long been under pressure from a variety of sources who question the educational value of such activities. Three relatively new issues will affect the growth and development of these programs: the "back to basics" movement, the spending ceilings imposed in local school districts by state legislatures, and the scarcity of qualified and competent forensics directors. Most coaches need to be much better prepared to respond to these issues, they need to develop educationally justifiable cocurricular programs, and they must be prepared to work more closely together as a forensics community. (Author/TJ)

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SECONDARY FORENSIC PROGRAMS: CAN THEY SURVIVE CURRENT PRESSURES?

Prof. Douglas M. Trank
60 English-Philosophy Bldg.
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa 52242
(319) 353-3685

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SECONDARY FORENSIC PROGRAMS: CAN THEY SURVIVE CURRENT PRESSURES?

ABSTRACT

Secondary forensic programs have long been under pressure from a variety of sources who question the educational value of our activities. The article deals with three relatively new issues that will affect the growth and development of our programs.

The first is the "Back-to-Basics" movement, the second concerns the spending ceilings imposed in local school districts by state legislatures, and the third deals with the scarcity of qualified and competent forensics directors. The author argues that most programs and coaches need to be much better prepared to respond to these issues, that we need to develop educationally justifiable cocurricular programs, and that we must be prepared to work more closely together as a forensics community.

SECONDARY FORENSIC PROGRAMS: CAN THEY SURVIVE CURRENT PRESSURES?

Forensic[1] activities are an integral part of the speech education process in Iowa. Many of our secondary programs are among the best in the nation, and their students consistently do very well in the National Forensic League's National Tournament. In addition, several of our colleges and universities have gained national recognition for the consistent quality of their forensic programs. The current Executive Director of the National Forensic League, Dennis Winfield, established his credentials as a teacher and administrator in Iowa and continues to maintain his strong ties with our state. The immediate Past President of the American Forensic Association, James Weaver, is the Chairman of the Department of Speech Communication at Iowa State University and a Past President of the Iowa Communication Association. The Director of the National University Extension Association's Committee on Debate and Discussion, Robert Kemp, is the debate coach at the University of Iowa and the Head of the Iowa Forensic League. The Iowa High School Speech Association, The National Forensic League, and the Iowa Forensic League are all active, well organized, and politically strong organizations dedicated to the advancement of secondary forensic activities in Iowa. These three organizations have joined the Iowa Communication Association and the state chapter of The International Thespian Society in the Federation of Iowa Speech Organizations. The purpose of this group (F.I.S.O.) is to promote, encourage, and coordinate speech, drama, and forensic activities in Iowa. No other state can begin to match this sort of dedication, support, leadership, organization, and success in the area of forensics.

The remarks which follow, then, are made with these preliminary observations in mind. We need to keep our focus in this discussion on forensics as an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people. Argumentation and debate, as practiced and taught in Iowa, is an integral part of this process. The forensic programs in Iowa have not been and should not be copies of programs in other parts of the country. Educators and administrators must continue to demonstrate the sort of leadership that has brought national recognition to the forensic programs in Iowa.

I will contend at the outset, however, that certain political and educational issues are going to make it difficult to maintain our tradition of excellence. As a school administrator, I could build a very persuasive case against forensic programs. The traditional arguments are still alive and we have done a miserable job of responding to them.[2] Our critics have long complained that we are involved in an elitist activity dealing with an insignificant percentage of the student population. This activity, in addition, is often excessively time consuming for those involved. Academic debate has been called artificial, and worse, by friends and foes. Some programs probably do

overemphasize winning, but the entire forensic community is allowed to share the criticism in this area. Critics claim that debate practices are sometimes unethical and our own colleagues complain about the attention that competitive forensic programs direct from classroom instruction in speech communication. This list could go on and on, but we are all too familiar with the traditional criticisms of forensic activities.[3] We can and, in fact, are responding to these criticisms.

Three relatively new concerns, however, pose even greater threats to the maintainence of top-quality forensic programs and the growth and development of new programs in Iowa. The first issue is commonly referred to as the "Back to Basics" movement that seems to be sweeping the country much like the Russian Flu did a few years ago. A few isolated outbreaks here and there, and pretty soon everyone in the entire country is wondering whether they "have it." It is difficult to respond as a forensic community to the arguments of these "back to basics" advocates because virtually every schoolboard in the state defines "basics" and makes decisions regarding their curricula on the basis of their individual and frequently unique situations. While "back to basics" has become a national chant, there is obviously "no widespread agreement about what the 'basics' are and how they should be taught."[4] I am certainly not against basic education, but I'm not sure I know what it means. I hope it means, among other things, students ought to be able to communicate-read, write, and speak-at a competent level by the time they graduate from high school. It ought to, and each of us should be involved in helping our respective school districts arrive at the same conclusion. This issue will not go away. Over fifty percent of the American populace, according to a recent Gallup poll, believe the best way to improve public instruction is to "devote more attention to teaching the basic skills."[5] What happens as a result of this public pressure is, in part, up to us.

A second issue that will have an impact on the forensic programs in Iowa concerns the spending ceilings imposed on local school districts by the state legislature. The original bill, adopted by the legislature in 1971, was intended to give the state some control over the additional financial aid they had agreed to give the local school districts. As school enrollments began to drop, however, the law became a nightmare for many districts. The formula in the law cuts nearly $1,300 from a school district's budget for each student lost through declining enrollment.[6] Most of you have first hand knowledge of the problems this creates. According to a survey of Iowa superintendents conducted by the Iowa Education Association, 20% of Iowa School Districts have had to cut educational programs and 35% have had to reduce the size of their teaching staff. We must all be concerned with the Association's conclusion that the "state-ordered ceilings on spending by local schools are hurting the quality of education in Iowa."[7]

The implications for extra-curricular speech programs seem all too obvious to me. Once again, the fate of our programs depends, in large part, on our ability to defend our activity as a necessary educational endeavor.

The third issue that concerns me is the scarcity of qualified and competent forensics directors.

I'm not referring to the three dozen or more established programs with a long tradition of solid support and sound administration, nor am I necessarily referring to the half-dozen exceptions we could enumerate. My concern is with the approximately five hundred schools in Iowa that do not have a sound educational co-curricular forensic program. My concern is with those school systems which have no forensic program and those that have not allowed forensics to become integrated into the academic curriculum.

What would happen, for example, if all the superintendents in Iowa decided that their schools should have a cocurricular forensic program next year? We, as a forensic community, would be unable to respond to such a situation. For example, only two of my last forty student teachers at the University of Iowa over the past four years could be honestly considered competent to go into a school and establish an educationally defensible cocurricular forensics program. I'll share my part of the blame for that, but you must also take part of the responsibility. For the present and the foreseeable future, at least, forensics lives within the professional and academic discipline of speech communication. I think that is where it belongs. And yet, a person can be certified to teach speech in Iowa without ever having seen a debate, let alone know anything about the argumentative process. According to a recent survey, only four, or seventeen percent, of the post-secondary institutions in Iowa require their speech education majors to take a course in directing forensics and debate in an order to graduate and receive speech certification. Only five, or twenty-one percent, require a course in argumentation.[8] The Department of Public Instruction adopted the NASDTEC guidelines for speech certification in March of 1978. Under these guidelines a speech teacher does <u>not</u> need to be competent in persuasion or argumentation or debate in order to be certified.[9] We also have several debate coaches who are competent in these areas and are running excellent debate programs but are not certified in speech. They cannot, by law, establish a cocurricular forensics program. What all this amounts to is simply this; we, as a forensic and professional community, have virtually no control over the educational requirements or qualifications of those individuals who will determine the future of forensics in Iowa.

I have spent a great deal of time enumerating and delineating the potential obstacles to the continued growth of forensics in Iowa. I am convinced, however, that it is something we must do. For it is with these very issues in mind that local

school boards, administrators, and teachers are asking the question, "should our school have a forensics program?" It is critical at this point that we, as forensic educators, present our case carefully and cogently. I have used the term "forensics" and the definition generated by the National Developmental Conference of Forensics throughout this paper for a definite reason. I am convinced that most Iowa schools, under the present restrictions and pressures previously discussed, could not successfully justify a traditional extra-curricular debate program as an educationally and economically sound venture. One would certainly have some difficulty justifying the expenditure of great amounts of faculty and student time and school district monies to initiate such a program at the present time.

In analyzing the forensics programs at the college level, David Thomas concluded, "currently, forensics has evolved to a sub-system dominated by debate tournaments."[10] His conclusion could be accurately applied to many of our secondary programs. We need to view "debate" in a much broader perspective. It is--it must be--more than a series of speeches practiced after school and preformed on the weekends in such popular winter resorts as Newton, Iowa City, and Des Moines. Douglas Ehninger, another Iowa educator, was arguing over twenty-five years ago that educators must view forensics as a cocurricular rather than an extra-curricular activity. This term "emphasizes the fact that activities outside the classroom are not mere adjuncts to formal class instruction, but are an integral part of the educative process."[11] The only educationally and economically justifiable type of forensic program, under our present circumstances, is one that is truly cocurricular. Debate coaches, regardless of their other obligations, are primarily educators.

What can we do to insure that our present programs continue to grow and to facilitate the development of new forensics programs? There are at least two areas in which we must respond. The first requires a collective effort on our part as forensics educators and the second requires individual responses based on the particular requirements of a given situation and school district.

We must become involved, as a forensic community, in establishing the common goals of forensics education. We should be actively involved in the Department of Public Instruction's attempts to establish guidelines for teacher training institutions in Iowa. We should also be involved in their attempts to establish criteria for secondary speech teacher certification. We must make a concerted effort to regulate our own profession. If we do not become actively involved in these policy decisions, individuals outside our profession will continue to establish our guidelines for us. That, to me, is not a viable option. The obvious organization for this input is the Iowa Communication Association. The Department of Public Instruction has gone

to this organization several times asking for additional input regarding certification criteria and guidelines. One thing is certain: if you are not actively involved in your state speech organization, your voice in these critical matters will not be heard. We also need to become even more involved in promoting forensics in Iowa through personal contacts. We need to be concerned about whether other school systems have forensic programs and be willing to help them initiate or improve such programs. We need to put pressure on the colleges and universities in the state to include training in forensics as part of their speech education requirements. We need to encourage our best teacher candidates to develop an interest and competence in forensic education.

Much of our immediate effort, however, must be directed to our own programs. Thomas warned college forensics directors that their most crucial task was "to identify the aims and goals of their forensic programs, articulate them to the departments, and demonstrate how forensics programs can be significant in the achievement of departmental objectives."[12] Directors of secondary programs must respond in a similar manner. We must identify the educational goals and objectives of our forensics programs, articulate them to our colleagues and our administration, and demonstrate how our programs can be a significant factor in the achievement of the school districts' goals and objectives.

We should welcome the "Back to Basics" movement and become actively involved in its interpretation in our particular educational system. Forensics educators need to be aware of the important documents in this area. For example, What's Really Basic in the Language Arts?, a 1977 report of a conference sponsored by the American College Testing Program (ACT), contains some very valuable information for us as we attempt to develop cocurricular forensic programs. The participants ranked "Speaking/Listening: recitation, public speaking, oral communication, debate, dramatization, note-taking, role playing, group interaction" as the third most important content area in the ideal High School Language Arts curriculum.[13] It was ranked behind the "Nature and History of Language" and "Writing," but ahead of such content areas as "Reading," "Critical Reading," "Literature," and "Usage."[14] It seems to me that we could use this sort of expert opinion.

It seems safe to assume that anyone arguing for basic education would consider communication skills a central element in such a curriculum. Writing and speaking and reading and listening are the modes through which we communicate. The processes of invention, investigation, analysis, reasoning, orgainzation, and critical thinking are common to each of these modes. They are some of the critical skills forensics educators have been teaching for years. It is our job to demonstrate to our respective school systems that we do have something valuable to offer to the educational process. The "back to basics" movement, it seems to me, has the capacity

to enhance our forensics programs. It provides us with immediate avenues into the heart of our academic curriculums. It also, obviously, has the capacity to reduce individual programs to little more than local speaker's bureaus. The end result depends, in large part, upon our informed and persuasive interactions with the policy making factions within our institutions.

Individuals and groups interested in revising school curriculums are likely to ask forensics educators what it is that they do. What does a student gain from forensics? What can students do after spending a year in your forensic program that they couldn't do before, or that they couldn't do by engaging in other less expensive and less time consuming activities? What is it that you teach that we couldn't be teaching in an English Class? Or, why should we even be teaching forensics? These are questions that "back to basics" advocates like to ask and questions that administrators, hard pressed to find places to cut their budgets, must ask. They are legitimate questions. They are questions that we should be asking ourselves. I think we also need to ask ourselves, "if what we do is so damm important, why do we restrict ourselves to a small percentage of the student population and do most of that work after school and on the weekends?"

As I have argued throughout this paper, forensics education can reach its greatest potential as a truly cocurricular program. I am not opposed to debate tournaments nor am I opposed to highly competitive forensics programs. In order for forensics education to reach its greatest potential, however, tournaments must be viewed as one of many ways students are allowed to demonstrate the natural extension of cognitive and affective behaviors learned and developed within the academic curriculum. Let me put it another way: if forensics education is an educationally justifiable activity it belongs within the academic curriculum. If not, let's quit wasting our time. The "back to basics" people and the budget cutters will get most of us anyway.

I assume that everyone in this room would agree that forensics education provides a valuable educational experience for our students. I assume that you also agree that we should be constantly striving to improve our programs and our profession. My position throughout this paper has been that forensics education can best develop as a cocurricular program. By teaching argumentation and critical thinking in the academic curriculum we can also attempt to help solve some of the problems that have given rise to the "back to basics" movement. It would also allow us to put the debate tournament in its proper perspective as one necessary and valuable extension of classroom instruction. It would help justify the existence of the debate squad in the face of the continuing decline of student enrollments and the concomitant decline of available monies in our school budgets. A cocurricular forensics education program would allow us to reach more students and a wider diversity of students. We could provide those students with a richer variety of activities through which they could demonstrate their

competence in using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people. "From this perspective, forensics activities, including debate and individual events, are laboratories for helping students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively in a variety of contexts with a variety of audiences."[15]

What does such a program look like? I'm not sure. I do know that there is no "perfect" program for us to copy. We must identify the educational goals and objectives of our own programs. Every school system is different, each of us has different capabilities and interests, and we all work with different students, colleagues, and administrators. Within these situations, however, we must be able to articulate those goals and objectives to a number of interested audiences. And, finally, we must demonstrate how our programs can be a significant factor in the achievement of the entire school district's goals and objectives. Help in achieving these goals is available. The report of the National Developmental Conference on Forensics (Forensics As Communication),[16] curriculum guides from school systems with successful programs, and interested colleagues are invaluable resources. Colleges and universities can also supply information and resources.

Some programs will continue to remain successful regardless of the external pressures, and some will probably fail even with the best leadership. Most programs, however, need to be much better prepared to respond to the inevitable results of the issues raised in this paper. We can respond most effectively if we view forensics education as it has been described in this paper, if we begin to develop educationally justifiable cocurricular programs, and if we work together as a professional forensics community. We must be committed to the development of new forensics programs and the continued growth of established programs. We have too much to offer our students to take any other position.

ENDNOTES

[1]I am using the term "forensics" as defined by National Developmental Conference on Forensics: Forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people." James H. McBath, Ed., Forensics As Communication (Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook Co., 1975), 11. The focus of my discussion is on the educational activity we call debate and the argumentation theory upon which it is based.

[2]See, for example, Robert D. Kully, "Forensics and the Speech Communication Discipline: Analysis of an Estrangement," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 9 (Spring 1972), 197; and David A Thomas, "Forensics Shock: Making Forensics Relevant to Tomorrow's Higher Education," Speech Teacher, 23 (September 1974), 235.

[3]An excellent summary of these objections may be found in R.R.Allen, S. Clay Willington, and Jo Sprague, Speech Communication in the Secondary School, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1976), 341-351.

[4]Robert F. Hogan and Stephen Judy, "The 'Back to Basics' Controversy," Media and Methods (September 1976), 18. Hogan is the Executive Secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English and Judy is the Editor of The English Journal.

[5]James L. Jarrett, "I'm For Basics, But let Me Define Them," Phi Delta Kappan (December 1977), 235.

[6]"Relief For Iowa's Schools," Des Moines Register, (November 14, 1977), P.10, C.1.

[7]"School Districts Report Quality Affected By Ceiling," Des Moines Register, (November 13, 1977), P. 10A, C.1.

[8]Douglas M. Trank and James Weaver, "Survey of Teacher Preparation Programs in Speech Communication in Iowa," Iowa Journal of Speech Communication (Fall 1978), 33-34.

[9]Memo from Orrin Nearhoff, March 3, 1978.

[10]David A. Thomas, 238.

[11]Douglas Ehninger, "Six Earmarks of A Sound Forensics Program," Speech Teacher, I (November 1952), 237.

[12]David A. Thomas, 239

[13]Renee M. Huntley, What's Really Basic In The Language Arts? (Iowa City: American College Testing Program, 1977), 4-5.

[14]Renee M. Huntley, 4-5.

[15]James H. McBath, 11.

[16]James H. McBath.